

REVIEWS/COMPTES RENDUS

Ancient, Classical, Medieval, and Renaissance/ L'Antiquité, l'Époque Classique, le Moyen Âge et la Renaissance

Byzantine Matters, by Averil Cameron. Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2014. xiv, 164 pp. \$22.95 US (cloth).

This wonderful sequence of reflections is by turns sensitive and acerbic, commending the latest insights by, most frequently, younger scholars and upbraiding older and less sympathetic approaches, or the failure of scholars generally to engage with serious Byzantine matters. Corrections are offered firmly but without malice to several prolific authors.

“Absence” is the jumping off point for chapter one, but the author is concerned far less here than in an earlier published paper, which appeared in the Greek journal *Nea Hestia*, with Byzantium’s absence from political and cultural discussions in Europe (outside Greece), and more with the problems Byzantium presents to experts who would present it to a broader audience. These same scholars so far have failed fully to expound Byzantium’s history and to comprehend its literature, most egregiously its abundant theological writings. The author frequently laments the failure of scholars properly to engage with the mass of theological works produced in Byzantium through a millennium, for this is the minimum span of time for which one might sensibly refer to the civilization under consideration. This view is implicit throughout the work and made explicit on several occasions, against those who would argue for a long late antiquity or would prefer to cut off the medieval Byzantine Empire from its ancient roots.

It becomes clear from the author’s second chapter that “empire” is inadequate to express properly the nature of Byzantine power, and it is not a term that Byzantines themselves used. “State” is, however, a perfectly accurate description (and translation of *politeuma*, contrary to the opinions of those who would wish to limit that term to a more recent period in political thought), and Cameron might have reflected on such terminology (also *basileia* and *oikoumene*) alongside her filleting of Dimitri Obolensky’s notion of “Commonwealth”

(restated somewhat differently by Jonathan Shepard, addressed and commended here, as overlapping circles). The capacity of the Byzantine state always to have maintained a legal framework, an ability to extract a surplus through taxation, and to sustain an army, are highlighted, as are less obvious but otherwise remarkable traits, for example the ability to move populations around. We are shown that the Byzantine state was neither tolerant nor totalitarian, both being anachronisms. Some political history punctuates the analysis.

Hellenism is the subject of the third essay, and here the tone is a little more astringent. The fraught relationship between Byzantium — both as a subject of study in Greece and elsewhere, and also as the past claimed by those who would promote Hellenic continuity — is addressed briefly but usefully. Definitions of Hellenism receive greater scrutiny, and observations by some younger scholars receive approbation, whereas a longer reflection by Anthony Kaldellis is generally regarded with skepticism as too narrow and inadequate to the task of unpacking the full toolbox required to extract, flatten out, and nail down the concept.

The final essays are the most detailed in the collection, and ascend to a higher level of sophistication. “Realms of Gold” has echoes of the author’s earlier interventions into the discussions of iconoclasm (the phenomenon rather than the capitalized period that has always animated Byzantinists). The author has read widely, if not comprehensively in the art historical literature (focusing on those who acknowledge that art and text must be studied together). She is most concerned with the intellectual theory of representation, signaling this by the well-chosen epigraphs. An equal interest in secular art and material culture (studies) is suggested but not fully explored, as this chapter is really a reflection on icons and their intellectual milieu.

“The Very Model of Orthodoxy?” the final chapter that one expected to be called simply “orthodoxy,” is signaled throughout the collection. It therefore takes on the role of a denouement, but is also a profound and original meditation. Orthodoxy is clearly the issue with which the author has been most deeply involved recently, passing to it through a concern for heresy and heresiology. This is the essay in which the author has the greatest number of most insightful, often novel, observations to offer. It is not the essay of a controversialist, nor is it offered from a confessional standpoint. As such it is acknowledged that the conclusions will trouble some for whom Orthodoxy is lived, “orthopraxy” (orthodox practice). Orthodoxy in Byzantium, we are told, was no monolith, but a negotiation with arguments forcefully advanced and proof-texts drawn from the fathers employed as weapons through the later centuries. There was no central authority and all intelligent voices might be heard. Judgment generally was tempered by “economy,” a term that fails properly to translate the Greek *oikonomia*. Here we are shown the benefits of engagement with the theological writings whose neglect has been berated elsewhere in the collection. A longish excursus on the reign of Alexios I is offered as a case study, its tone rather different to the rest of the work. It suggests further reflection will come, but later, not in this short book.

These are the reflections of a sophisticated scholar who knows her field and its big questions, but also its practitioners and their limitations. She is at her best when engaging in areas others have not troubled properly to think through, or which they were unaware mattered at all. This small book will force those who have not engaged to realize why they must, just as it will provoke those who are engaged to respond.

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Cross and Scepter: The Rise of the Scandinavian Kingdoms from the Vikings to the Reformation, by Sverre Bagge. Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2014. vi, 325 pp. \$29.95 US (cloth).

This volume is intended to be a short, synthetic history of the introduction of Christianity and the formation of kingdoms in Scandinavia as well as micro-history of state formation and cultural change throughout Latin Christendom in the High Middle Ages. The author, Sverre Bagge, covers the changes that took place in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden from the formation of the Three Kingdoms until the end of the Kalmar Union in the early sixteenth century. He explores the transition from Paganism to Christianity, the reception of European-style formal learning and the transformation of law and justice, military and administrative organization, social structure, political culture, and the division of power among the monarchy, aristocracy, common people, and the Church. Its approach is broad enough that it comes close to being a general history of medieval Scandinavia.

A major theme of the book is the parallel development of the Scandinavian kingdoms and other European states, for example Poland, Bohemia, and Hungary (pp. 36, 69, 77). Bagge begins the narrative in the Viking Age as the three kingdoms arise out of a series of struggles between individual warlords. He emphasizes the “apparently coincidental division between them,” which had been established in the mid-eleventh century (p. 49). This sometimes leads to gaps, for instance he mentions Harald Bluetooth’s boast about conquering Norway without comment (p. 31).

The further consolidation of the Scandinavian kingdoms was intimately tied up with the introduction of Christianity. Bagge describes the development of church institutions, ecclesiastical law, royal legislative powers, and a court system: “The rise of the ecclesiastical organization therefore forms an important part of the explanation for the stability of the three kingdoms” (p. 83). The debt to Joseph R. Strayer is notable, and openly acknowledged in the introduction (pp. 3-4). New military technology — heavy cavalry and castles — was also